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SUBJECT: GOE CLAMPS DOWN ON OROMOS, OPPOSITION PARTIES

REF: A. ADDIS 3050
[1](#)B. ADDIS 3092

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Deborah Malac for reasons 1.4 (B)
) & (D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Over the past two weeks, the Ethiopian government (GoE) has arrested at least 53 ethnic Oromos (some reports are as high as 200) and supporters of the mainstream political opposition Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) for alleged support to the banned Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Police, local authorities, and ruling party cadres have also detained and/or arrested more than a dozen second-tier leaders from various opposition parties engaged in community outreach or opening new offices throughout Ethiopia since late-October. The GoE argues that the Oromo arrests are a response to the current heightened security threat in Ethiopia. The absence of any non-GoE sourced reporting to support this, combined with the fact that the current political crackdown began before the October 29 attacks in Somaliland and Puntland -- which triggered the current security posture -- suggest that the crackdown aims to chill mainstream political activity in advance of the 2010 national elections. The security deployment since the Somaliland and Puntland attacks appears to have provided convenient cover to expand the crackdown to Oromos more broadly. End Summary.

GoE Claims OLF is Behind Terrorist Threat

[1](#)2. (SBU) On November 5, the GoE announced that the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) received credible information about an impending terrorist plot to be carried out inside Ethiopia. On the same day the Federal Police detained alleged OLF members for allegedly plotting an attack. Some of the detainees were accused of operating under the guise of being members of legal parties like the OFDM and ONC. On October 16, Prime Minister Meles told Parliament that the GoE had concrete proof that the OLF was behind every explosion in Ethiopia outside of the Somali region over the past year. Following this trend, the GoE issued a statement on November 9 that members of the opposition Oromo People's Congress (OPC) and the OFDM are working "hand in glove" with the OLF.

[1](#)3. (C) Over a series of early November meetings with Prime Minister Meles and Foreign Minister Seyoum, the Ambassador noted that the public sees the arrests as political because the government has not gone into detail on evidence and reasons for arresting Oromos and opposition party members.

Without presenting any specific details, Meles replied that the GoE has clear evidence of their ties to the OLF which is engaged in terrorist activities. The USG and we do not consider the OLF a terrorist group, but a domestic rebel group. Both Meles and Seyoum argued separately that the judicial process will bear out their ties to extremists.

Targeting Oromos

¶4. (SBU) In the past two weeks at least 53 ethnic Oromos have been arrested, including many with no obvious political affiliation. The number is likely much higher (with some reports from credible opposition sources as high as 200) but is difficult to determine due to the limited accessibility of information, especially in the provinces. The detentions of Kebede Borena, Deputy Manager of the Hilton Hotel in Addis Ababa and Assefa Tefera, Oromifa language lecturer at Addis Ababa University, shocked many in the Oromo community, according to our contacts. Other ethnic Oromos arrested on allegations of OLF ties since October 30 include: Aberash Yadeta (private company, manager); Chalchisa Abdisa (Fincha Sugar Factory, employee); Diribsa Legesse (Fincha Sugar Factory, employee); Eshetu Kitil (businessman); Emiru Gurmessa (Hawi Hotel Addis Ababa, owner/manager); Bekele Geleta; Kibebew Feye; Dejene Borena; Benti Buli; and Kejela Abdeta.

¶5. (SBU) In addition to the non-partisan Oromos, police have targeted mainstream Oromo politicians. OFDM Secretary General Bekele Jirata was arrested on October 30. The

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government has accused him of sending money to the OLF in Nairobi. Following Bekele's arrest, police searched his home without a search warrant and confiscated documents. Bekele was brought before court within twenty-four hours of his arrest, and will appear again before a judge on November 14. He has not been able to see a lawyer, his family, or a priest. In addition to his position with OFDM, Bekele is Chairman of the Organizing Committee in the Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia, which was established in June 2008 to foster dialogue between Ethiopia's political parties. Bekele is the only member of the Forum who is not a Member of Parliament and thus does not have immunity. Bekele's arrest forced the postponement of an OFDM conference that had been scheduled for November 1-2. Hussein Abdul Kadir, OFDM Whip and an MP was arrested on November 9 (despite his immunity) and accused of violating Ethiopia's campaign law. He was taken to the police station and interrogated for two hours. Police said he was campaigning too early, but OFDM leaders say he was just traveling from one town to the next. In an e-mail to Ambassadors from most western countries on November 6, OFDM Chairman Bulcha Demeksa emphasized that the OFDM is a legal opposition party carrying out political activities within the framework of the constitution and said in a private conversation with Poloff that it appears the government is sending a strong message to opposition parties to "stay at home." He also denied that Bekele is linked to the OLF.

Opposition Party Arrests

¶6. (SBU) OFDM was not the only opposition targeted in the recent crackdown. Members of the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party, All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP), and Oromo People's Congress (OPC) have also been detained, most while attempting to open party offices or engage in lawful political activity. Leaders from these parties have confirmed to us that the following individuals have been arrested or detained in recent weeks:

-- OPC members Shumi Dandera and Roba Degefa, for unspecified reasons in Ambo and Addis Ababa (respectively) the week of October 27;

-- UDJ Officials Daniel WoldeGebriel and Gobeze Demtew, for trying to open a political office in the town of Metu. While investigating the arrests, UDJ Head of Public Relations Dr. Hailu Araya's car was vandalized in front of the police station. Daniel and Gobeze were released a few hours after being detained;

-- Head of UDJ Organizational Affairs Gizachew Shiferaw, and MPs Amiro Aweke and Libay Abebe, for attempting to open UDJ branch offices in Western Gojam on November 1. All have been released;

-- AEUP member Ali Mirah Yayu, for failure to vacate a newly-opened party office in Assayita town (Afar region). The landlord (Ali Harab) was beaten by police and local Cadres for having rented AEUP the office, according to AEUP sources;

-- Tadios Tantu, AEUP Vice Chairman, for trying to open a party office on October 28 in Sodo, despite having a certificate from the National Election Board (NEB) authorizing the opening. Police officers confiscated party documents;

-- Bekele Girma, AEUP member, for organizing party members in Abaya Wereda on October 22. He was released on October 24, without being taken to court;

-- Getye Desta, AEUP official, for unspecified reasons on October 25 in Assagerat Wereda (Amhara region). He was released on the October 27; and

-- Teferi Zeleke, Tadesa Kelo, and Hassan Hagadeban, for unauthorized political activities in in Basketo district, despite having a certificate from the NEB.

Why Now? The Oromo Perspective

17. (SBU) Mainstream Oromo political opposition leaders with whom we have spoken offered several possible explanations for

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the recent crackdown. First, they said the EPRDF seeks to intimidate and instill fear in opposition parties in the run-up to the 2010 national elections. While the elections are over 18 months away, the GoE seems to be proactively discouraging opposition parties from organizing. The arrests are also intended to chill local populations, making people less likely to support or vote for opposition parties. Second, Oromo party leaders believe the EPRDF intends to subjugate, weaken, and demoralize the Oromo people in order to prevent them, as the nation's largest ethnic group, from organizing to challenge the EPRDF's grip on power. The OFDM and the OPC (the most prominent legal Oromo political parties) have recently been working on settling their differences, and the prospect of greater Oromo political unity is a serious threat to the EPRDF, our contacts added.

18. (SBU) Third, the recent initiatives of the Ethiopian Elders to mediate between the GoE and the OLF threatens the regime, our contacts speculated. Our Oromo contacts note that Meles' inner circle may not want the negotiations to succeed, since the OLF has a lot of support within the country and legitimizing the organization would undermine the EPRDF's hold on power. The recent wave of arrests could therefore be intended to sabotage the attempted reconciliation efforts. (Note: The Prime Minister has tacitly sanctioned these reconciliation efforts and has informed the Ambassador of this. End Note.) Fourth, Oromo leaders pointed out that government moles infiltrated the OLF and may now be identifying OLF supporters. MP and former Oromo National Congress (ONC) member Lebeta Fufa and MP and ONC Chairman Teffera Legesse left the parliament a few years ago to join

the OLF, claiming that the government was corrupt and ineffective. A few months ago they left the OLF to rejoin the government. They may be pinpointing OLF sympathizers. Finally, Oromo party leaders said that the GoE is worried that a shift in U.S. policy is imminent and wants to instill fear among the population before it comes under too much scrutiny over human rights abuses. It fears that HR 2003 or similar legislation will pass once President-elect Obama takes office, backed by a Democrat-led Congress.

Implications for 2010

¶9. (C) If the current trend continues, it could seriously hinder the participation of opposition parties in the upcoming elections, according to opposition contacts. Following the local elections, when opposition parties were prevented from registering and campaigning, opposition leaders are expressing discouragement and are not hopeful about the 2010 elections. One opposition leader stated that "divine power" will be needed to participate in the 2010 elections and added that, unless the donor community condemns the GoE and applies pressure to allow opposition parties to organize and campaign, there is little hope for a free and fair election. Leaders of the OFDM and OPC also noted that the 2010 elections would be the last straw, and many would leave the political space if there is no improvement in the political process. If this level of harassment continues and the 2010 elections are stolen by the EPRDF, the consequences could be grave. According to OFDM leaders, it is likely that people won't accept the results, and violence will ensue.

Comment

¶10. (C) With the 2010 elections little more than eighteen months away, the recent roundup appears to be an attempt by the GoE to scare, harass, and intimidate the opposition parties before they are able to mobilize. We have seen no evidence from non-GoE sources to suggest the existence of linkages between the detained Oromos and the OLF, nor any information suggesting that the OLF poses a credible significant security threat at this time, much less supporting the GoE's claim that the OLF is planning an imminent attack in Ethiopia. While the OLF has called for armed struggle against the GoE and has conducted small-scale attacks against government or military targets in the past, it has not demonstrated over its 14 years against this government the ability to conduct an attack of sufficient magnitude to warrant the observed GoE security response. Instead, it appears that the GoE has deployed security forces heavily around Addis Ababa in response to a genuine terrorist threat (Ref. A) and is taking advantage of this deployment to

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provide cover to engage in this unrelated crackdown on second tier opposition leaders and dissidents. Therefore, we should not connect the arrests of the Oromo opposition with the arrests of extremists. The arrests of the Oromos appears to be purely political and a "side benefit" to the unprecedented crackdown on suspected extremists trying to infiltrate Addis Ababa. The GoE seems to be sending a strong message to the people of Ethiopia that the EPRDF is in charge and is willing to disregard human rights and the rule of law in order to maintain the party's grip on power.

¶11. (C) With the current crackdown on Oromos and the opposition, the GoE seems to be moving further away from achieving an active, multi-party democracy. As long as the majority Oromo ethnic group continues to be shut out of the core leadership and opposition parties are prevented from sharing the political space, stability in this country will remain fragile. Ambassador and SFRC Senior Staff Member Michael Phelan raised USG concerns about the recent crackdown on Oromos with Prime Minister Meles on November 6 (Ref. B), the Ambassador raised the issue twice with Foreign Minister

Seyoum on November 17 and in the previous week, again with State Minister Tekeda on November 8, and we will continue to note USG concerns about such actions with GoE principals.

End Comment.

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